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A Survey of Beginner's Language Teaching in UK Classics Departments: Ancient Greek

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A Survey of Beginner's Language Teaching in UK Classics Departments: Ancient Greek

Introduction

In 2013, Mair Lloyd and James Robson resolved to undertake a survey of *ab initio* classical language teaching in the UK. The last such survey had been conducted by Nick Lowe back in 1995, the results of which were published in CUCD Bulletin the same year (*CUCD Bulletin* 24: pp. 30-62). The 1995 survey was a *tour de force*, but we were keen to see how the world had moved on and, in particular, how pedagogy had evolved, not least in the light of new technology. A questionnaire was duly sent out in early December 2013 to Classics Departments and colleagues gave generously of their time in completing what was a fairly long and detailed set of questions. We have presented snapshots of the survey's results during the course of various presentations over the last four years, but have not until now been in a position to publish the results in full. Depending on one's point of view this is tardiness beyond all measure and/or a good example of life getting in the way. In no particular order we list amongst our respective lame excuses: a Head of Departmentship, a Head of Schoolship, a PhD, a series of new jobs, a crazy set of teaching commitments, various house moves and a baby.

The questions in the 2013 survey broadly reflect those asked back in 1995, with the topics covered including: the aims of *ab initio* modules, teaching materials and coverage, class sizes, methods of teaching and learning and assessment. One notable addition is that the 2013 version also covered the use of technology in teaching along with instructors' attitudes towards it. The survey was closed at the end of June 2014 at which point we had received responses from 24 of the 27 universities that were at that time members of the Council of University Classics Departments (CUCD). Perhaps the most significant changes in the last 20 years concern the amount of ground covered by *ab initio* modules (textbooks tend to be worked through more slowly than in 1995: see Section 9); the richer mix of assessment tasks in evidence (see Section 10); and, somewhat inevitably perhaps, the integration of technology into teaching and learning by some, if not all, instructors (see Section 13).

Thanks are due to Nick Lowe for his encouragement and for kindly providing us with his original set of questions. And we also extend our gratitude and warm thanks to the 24 respondents who were good enough to complete this survey.

Note that the current report covers only Ancient Greek provision in UK Classics departments. It will be followed by a further instalment summarizing the responses about Latin teaching.

1. Reasons for studying Ancient Greek and the aims of *ab initio* courses

Q: *In your personal opinion, what is the single most important reason why a student on a Classics or Classics-related degree course should study Ancient Greek?*

This was an open question from which the following themes and representative responses emerged. Some respondents emphasized the importance to students of gaining direct access to ancient texts (and of appreciating their literary and stylistic qualities):

In order to read the ancient texts in the original language.

Authentic and independent access to texts and sources.

Others stressed the role of language acquisition in allowing students to enter the thought world of the ancient Greeks:

To engage directly with the thoughts, beliefs, culture and society of a people in their own language.

Because the society's culture and values are embedded in the language and knowing the language is the most direct and secure path to accessing these aspects.

The largest number emphasized the independence of judgement that students are able to bring to their studies through knowledge of the language:

Because many important matters of interpretation of historical, social and other matters are crucially dependent on translation and ranges of meanings of words. Knowledge of the language empowers students, even if only to the extent of appreciating the dangers of relying on translations.

To be able to study the texts and inscriptions, etc., in the original language with a view to joining a community of students and scholars who can improve, debate and disseminate their interpretation.

It gives them more direct access to the ancient world, in much the same way artefacts do. Without access to the texts in the original languages, the students rely upon translators and lecturers as the 'authority'. This stunts their intellectual growth, curiosity and

confidence. It lends itself to a critical approach to the written word and establishes students themselves as valuable thinkers.

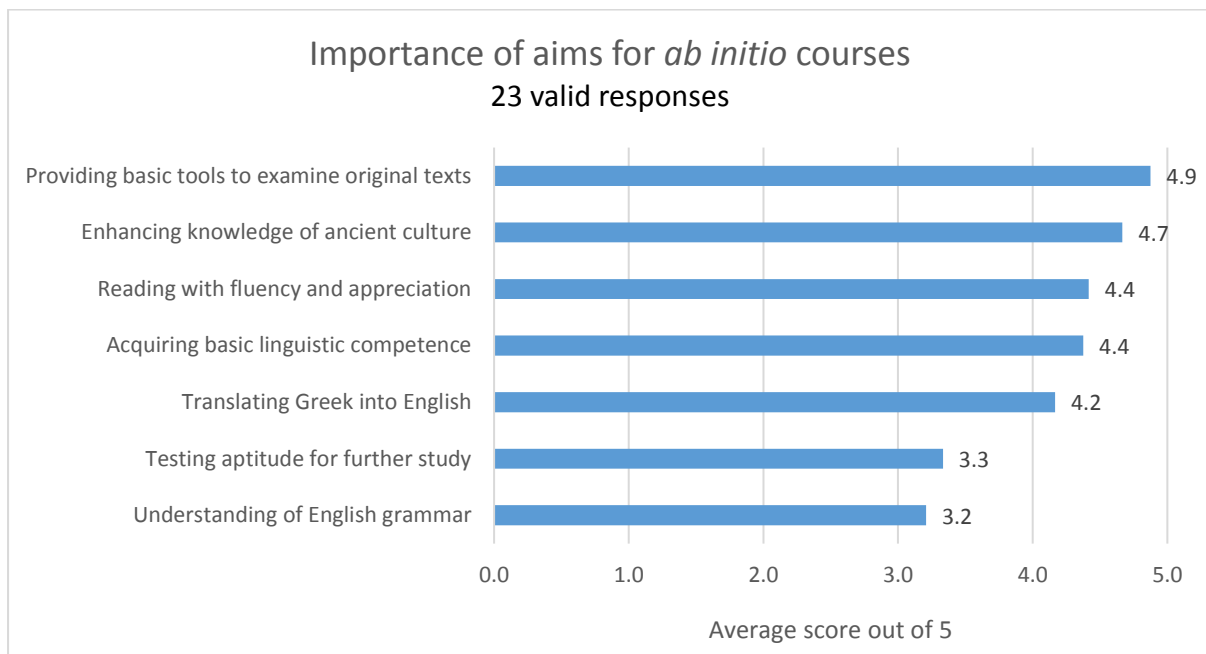
Other benefits were also mentioned:

Development of transferable skills, e.g. analysing texts, necessary for future employment.

To understand and to reflect on the links between the Greek and Roman world and their own language and culture.

To improve language awareness and hence general analytical and communication skills.

Q: What is the level of importance of the following aims for the *ab initio* module(s) in Ancient Greek in your university?



This multiple choice question asked respondents to score the importance of each suggested aim from 0 ('totally irrelevant') to 5 ('extremely important'). Scores for each aim were averaged to rank the aims in order of perceived importance as shown in the chart above.

When given the option to state further important aims, respondents replied:

- To enhance students' awareness of the relations between form and meaning in English;
- Ability to read terminology used by scholars in their articles;
- Levelling the playing field for students who have had no previous opportunity to study the language;

- As a vehicle for independent reading, research and working with reference tools.

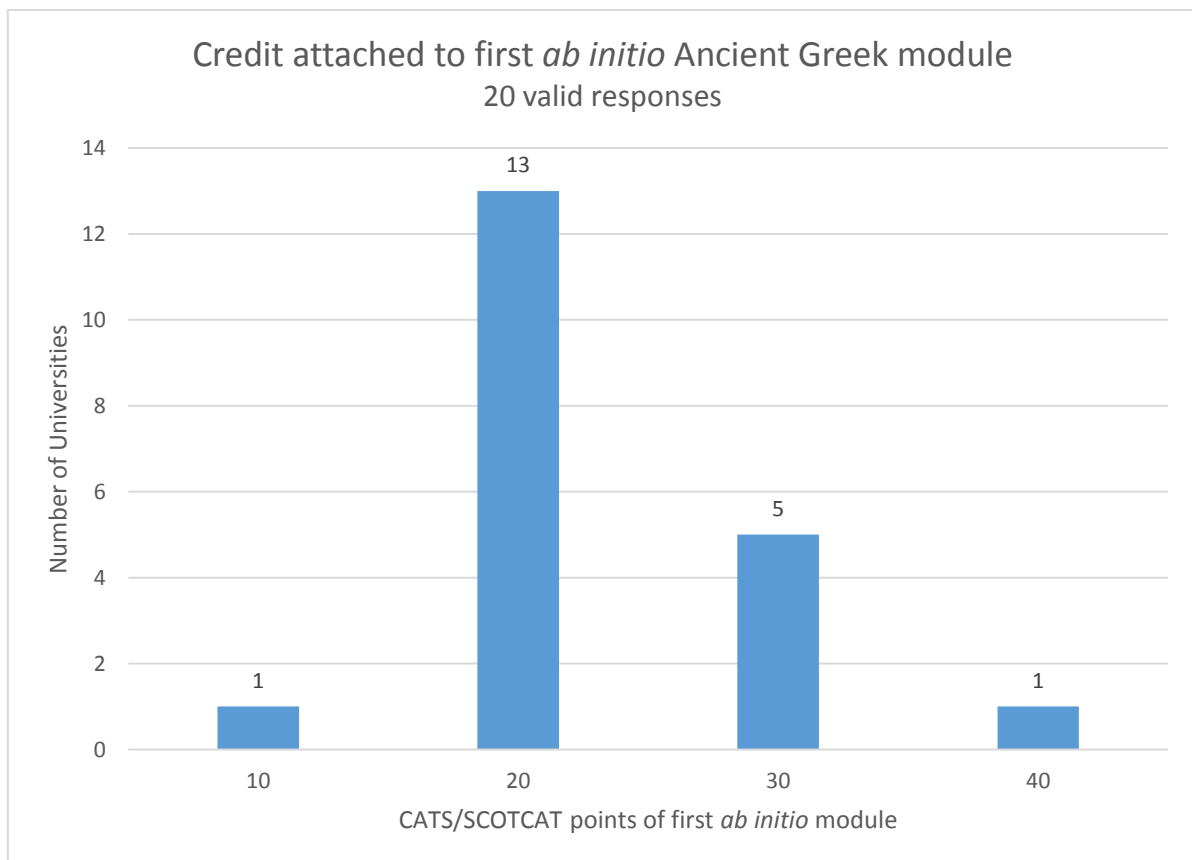
2. Is there a single *ab initio* module or more?

Nine institutions reported that they ran more than one *ab initio* module. Some described differences between their UG and PG beginner's modules: in some cases distinct classes are run; in others both cohorts taught together, often with slightly different teaching arrangements and/or assessment.

One institution operates two distinct streams at beginner's level for UG students: Beginner's Greek and 'false beginners' for those with previous study. Another runs both standard and fast track beginner's modules. In a further institution, New Testament/Hellenistic Greek is offered in addition to Classical Greek.

3. CATS/SCOTCAT points per *ab initio* module

Q: How many credit points (CATS/SCOTCAT points) does the *ab initio* Ancient Greek module carry?

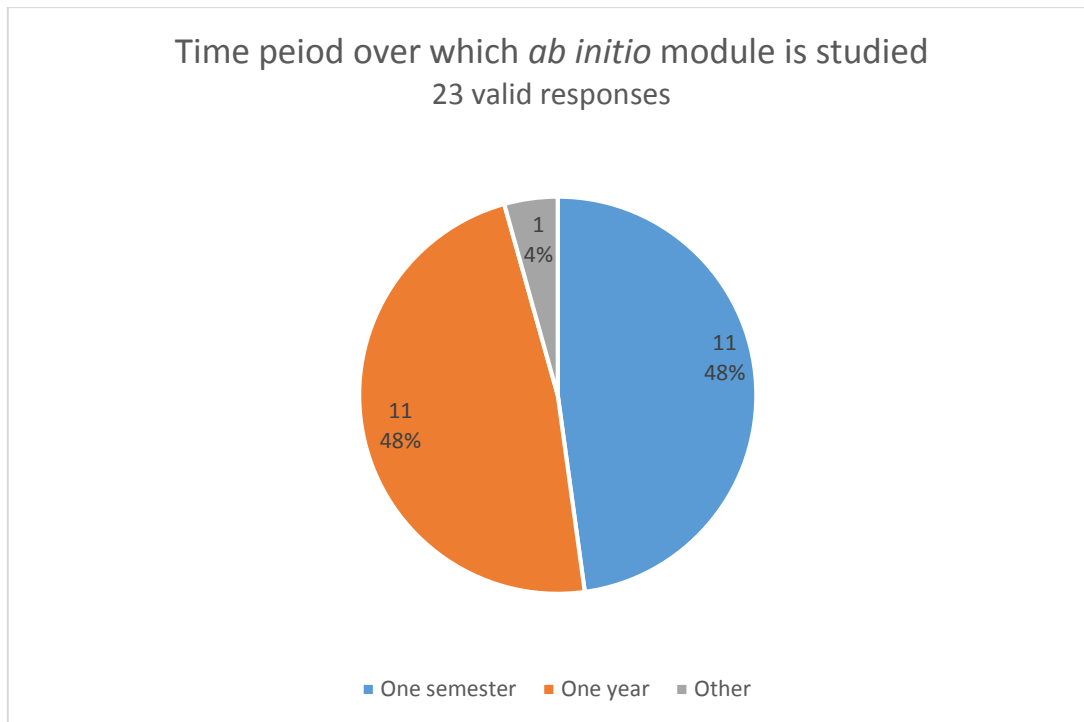


NB This charts captures the credit attached to the *first* beginner's module studied by students. A large number of institutions offer two sequential modules for beginners spread over a single academic year, but here we record the points awarded for the first module only.

The single 40 CATS points *ab initio* course was described as a double module, running the whole length of the academic year.

A further institution not included in this table reported running a combined beginner's language and literature in translation module worth 60 CATS points.

4. Time period over which beginner's modules are studied



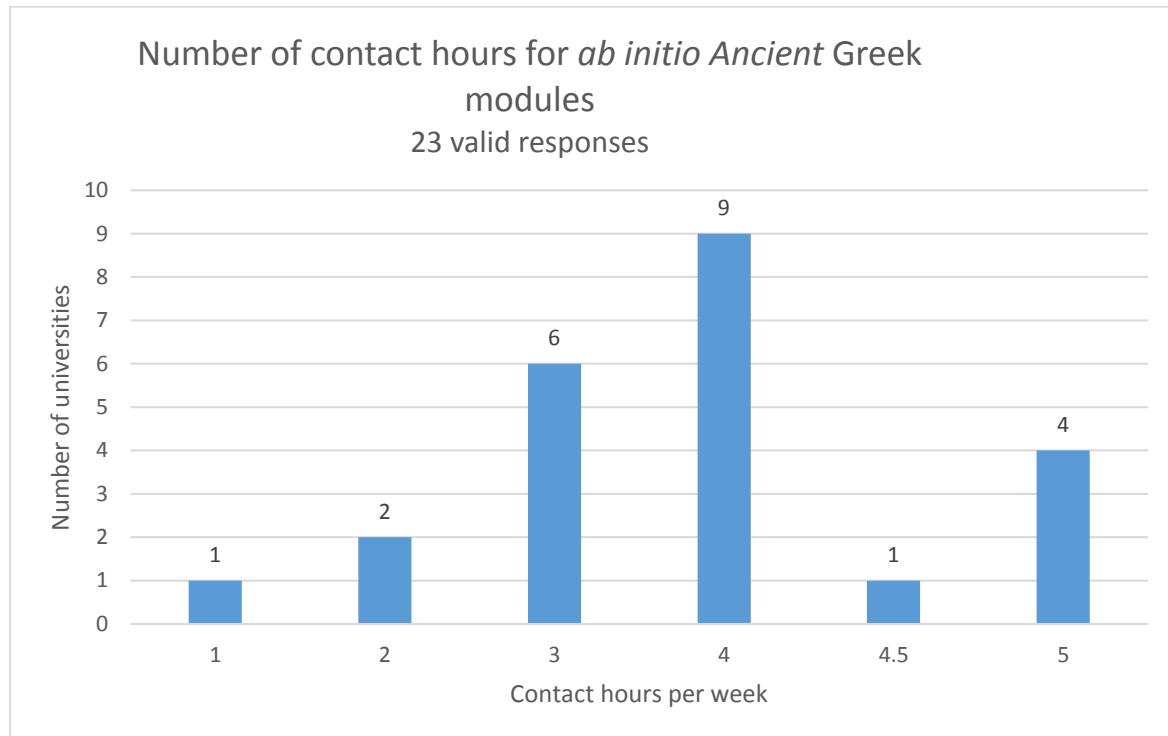
In those 11 institutions offering an initial beginner's UG module lasting one semester, students were then able (and at least in one case compelled) to take a follow-on module in the second semester.

One institution reported an experiment in running Beginner's Greek as a 3-week intensive module.

5. Contact hours per week

Q: How many contact hours are there per week for the *ab initio* module(s) offered?

Standard teaching models



Where universities described more than one teaching model, the most standard was selected (e.g. not fast-track, etc). One institution reported offering both a 3-hour and a 4-hour per week model for different *ab initio* modules: only the 3-hour figure has been included above. Two of the universities recorded as delivering 5 contact hours per week reported that this comprised 4 hours of classes plus a 1 hour tutorial. The university recorded as giving 4.5 hours specified 4 or 5 hours per week.

An average number of contact hours was 3.63; this compares with an average of 3.3 reported in the 1995 survey.

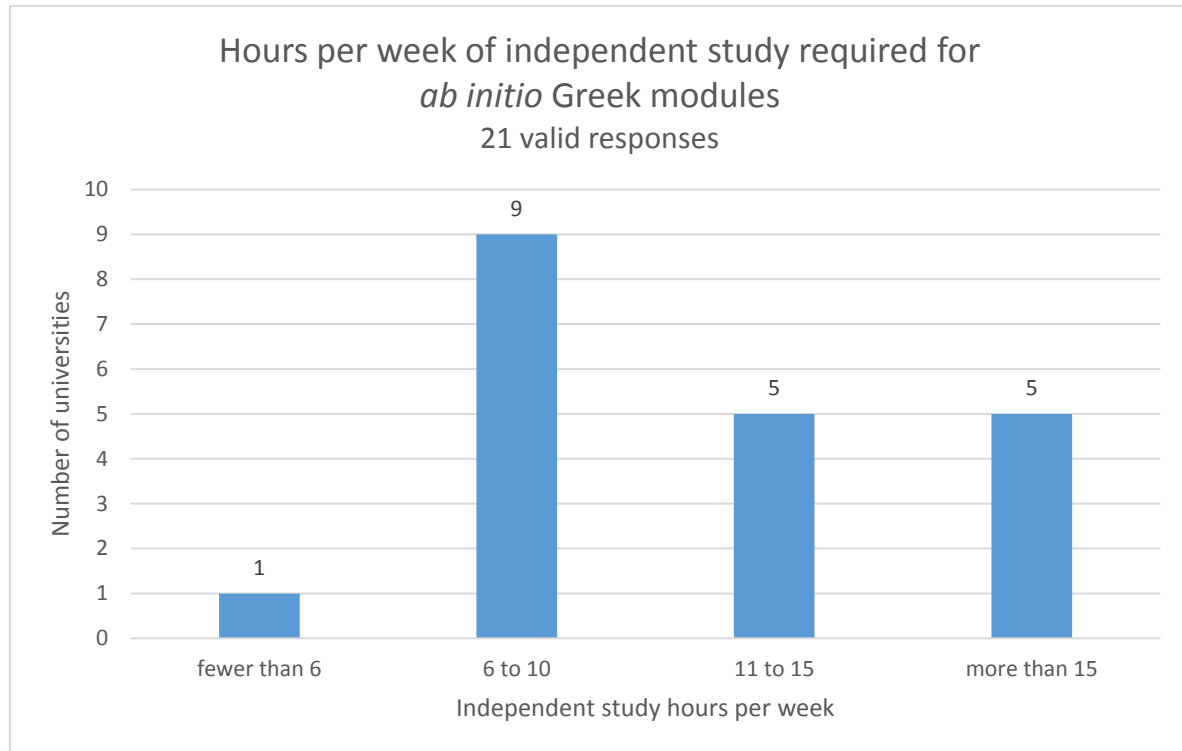
Non-standard teaching models

One institution offers an intensive three-week module with 3 teaching hours per day over a period of 12 days.

Another institution offers different streams with a core 5 hours per week for the first two terms, followed by a combination of language and text-reading classes in subsequent terms.

6. Hours of private study required

Q: In addition to contact hours, roughly how many hours per week of private study are students expected to do for the *ab initio* module?



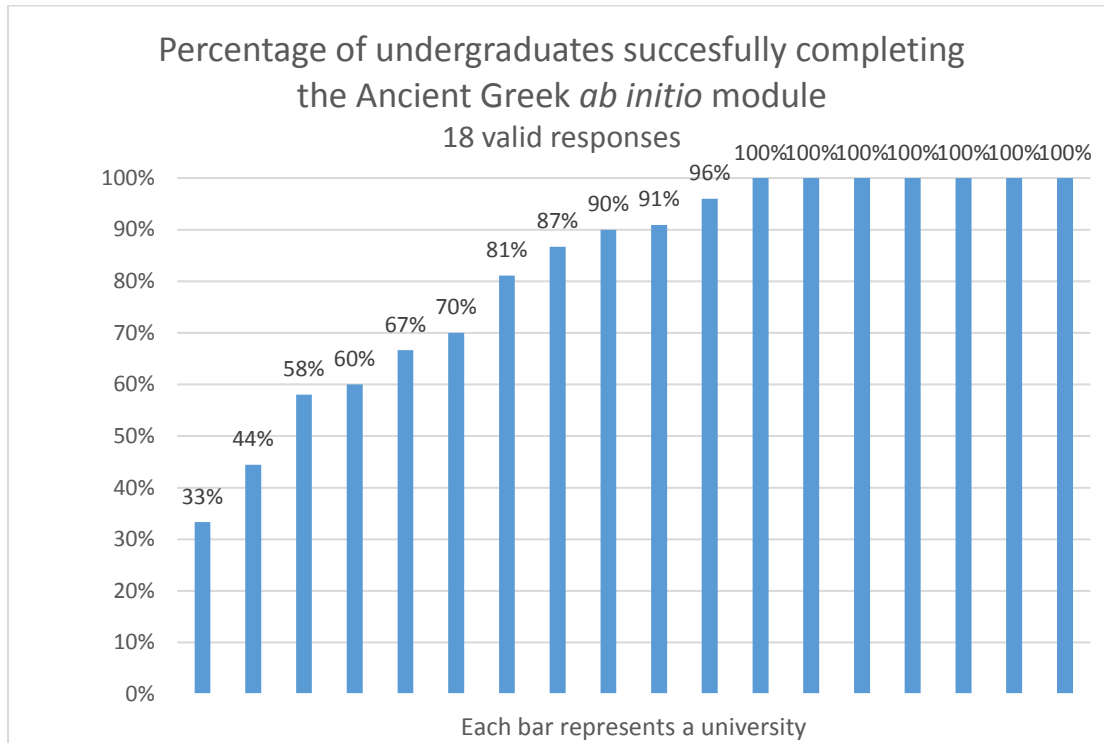
7. Student enrolments and pass rates

Enrolments

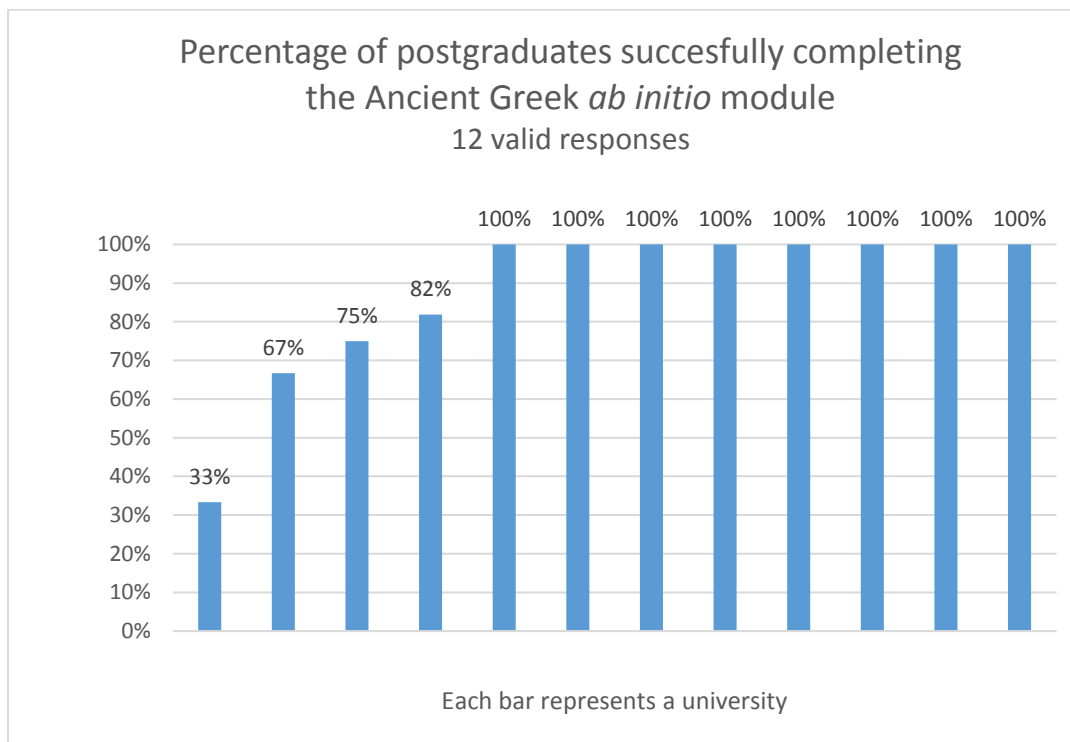
According to CUCD statistics, 800 undergraduates and 94 postgraduates were enrolled on Beginner's Greek modules in 2012-13. The following tables, based on data reported by our respondents, covers 586 undergraduates and 58 postgraduates. Some of this difference in totals is due to the fact that of the 27 universities surveyed, only 18 universities provided valid responses for undergraduate pass rates and 14 for postgraduate rates (two of these universities had no postgraduate students).

Pass rates

Undergraduate pass rates varied from 33% to 100% (the latter reported in seven institutions). The overall undergraduate pass rate across all 18 valid responses was 80%.

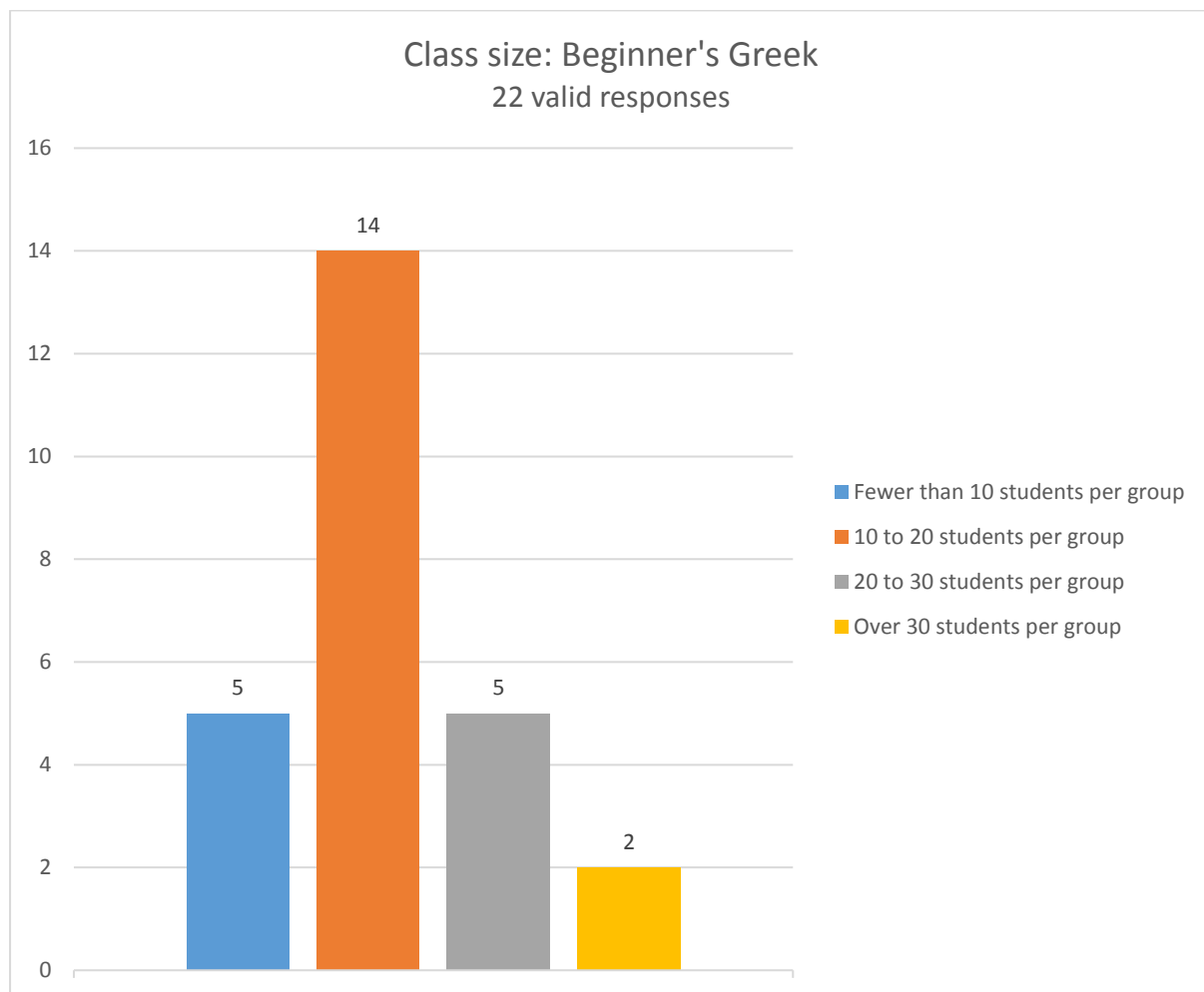


Postgraduate pass rates also varied from 33% to 100% (the latter reported in eight institutions). The overall postgraduate pass rate was 85%.



8. Class sizes

While most institutions reported teaching beginners as a single group, some ran more than one module whereas others split the cohort up for some (or all) of their teaching. The following graph represents the group size in 26 classes taught in 22 institutions.



9. Material covered and credits gained

Q: Please indicate the level which ab initio students are expected to reach by the end of their first year of study (this may comprise more than one module) and the number of credits which they gain.

Respondents answered this question in a variety of ways, some referencing the course book used (e.g. *Athenaze*, *Reading Greek*, *Greek to GCSE*), while others chose to measure progress through rough equivalence to GCSE or A Level study. Helpfully, many respondents whose institutions offer both preliminary and follow-on beginner's modules over the course of a single year provided data for both modules.

As can be seen from the individual responses listed under each heading, there are notable differences in the quantity of material that students were expected to cover per unit of credit. (NB credit is conceived of here in terms of CATS/SCOTCAT points rather than ECTS). CATS points gained per chapter of *Athenaze* studied ranged from 0.97 to 2.2, while for *Reading Greek* the range was between 2.86 and 5 CATS points per section.

Athenaze

20 credits: end of Chapter 9
20 credits: end of Chapter 11
20 credits: end of Chapter 12
30 credits: end of Chapter 16 (i.e. end of Book 1)
40 credits: end of Chapter 16
40 credits: end of Chapter 20
30 credits: end of Chapter 31 (i.e. end of Book 2)
40 credits: end of Chapter 31
60 credits: end of Chapter 31

Reading Greek

20 credits: end of Section 4
20 credits: end of Section 6
40 credits: end of Section 8
30 credits: end of Section 9
40 credits: end of Section 9
40 credits: end of Section 14

Greek to GCSE (Part 1 / Part 2)

20 credits: end of Chapter 4
30 credits: roughly end of Chapter 12 ('approximately GCSE standard')
40 credits: end of Chapter 6

GCSE/A Level equivalence

10 credits: 'effectively GCSE level'
30 credits: GCSE standard/end of Wilding's *Greek for Beginners*
40 credits: 'in between GCSE and A Level'
40 credits: 'I would say A level equivalence as an ideal but the reality is more like AS or GCSE'
40 credits: roughly A Level standard
60 credits: A Level standard

Other

20 credits: 'translating Greek to English with a reasonable level of success'
20 credits: 'the basics of grammar and ... ready to move onto the study of real

Greek’

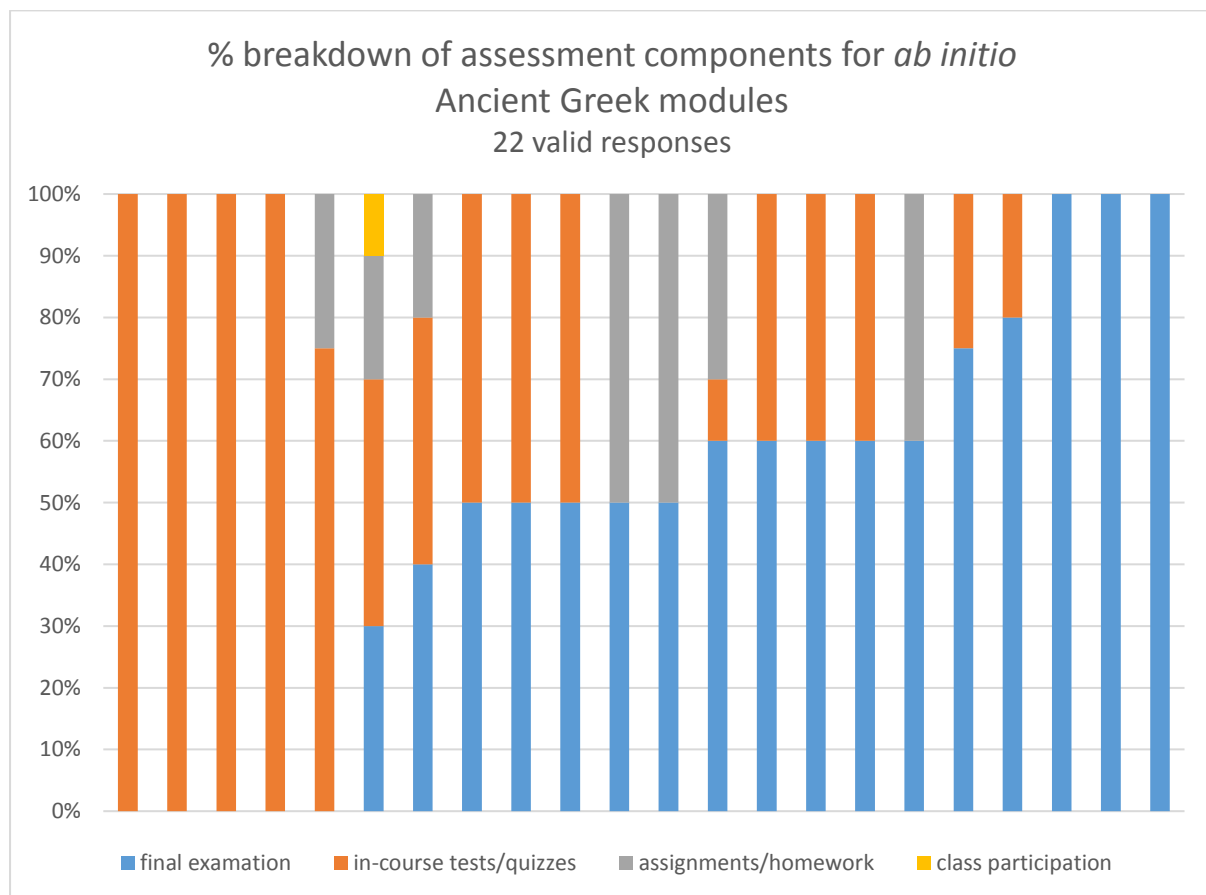
40 credits: the end of *Teach Yourself Greek*

In the 1995 survey, the median point of *Reading Greek* reached by *ab initio* students was Section 12 (of the old-style book) over the course of a year, with the least ambitious course reaching Section 8. Those using *Athenaze* in 1995 typically completed both books in a year.

10. Assessment methods

In 1995, 23 respondents reported that their *ab initio* Greek students sat a final examination, whereas only 10 modules used in-course tests. As the table below shows, in 2013-14 the majority of modules involved a mix of assessment methods.

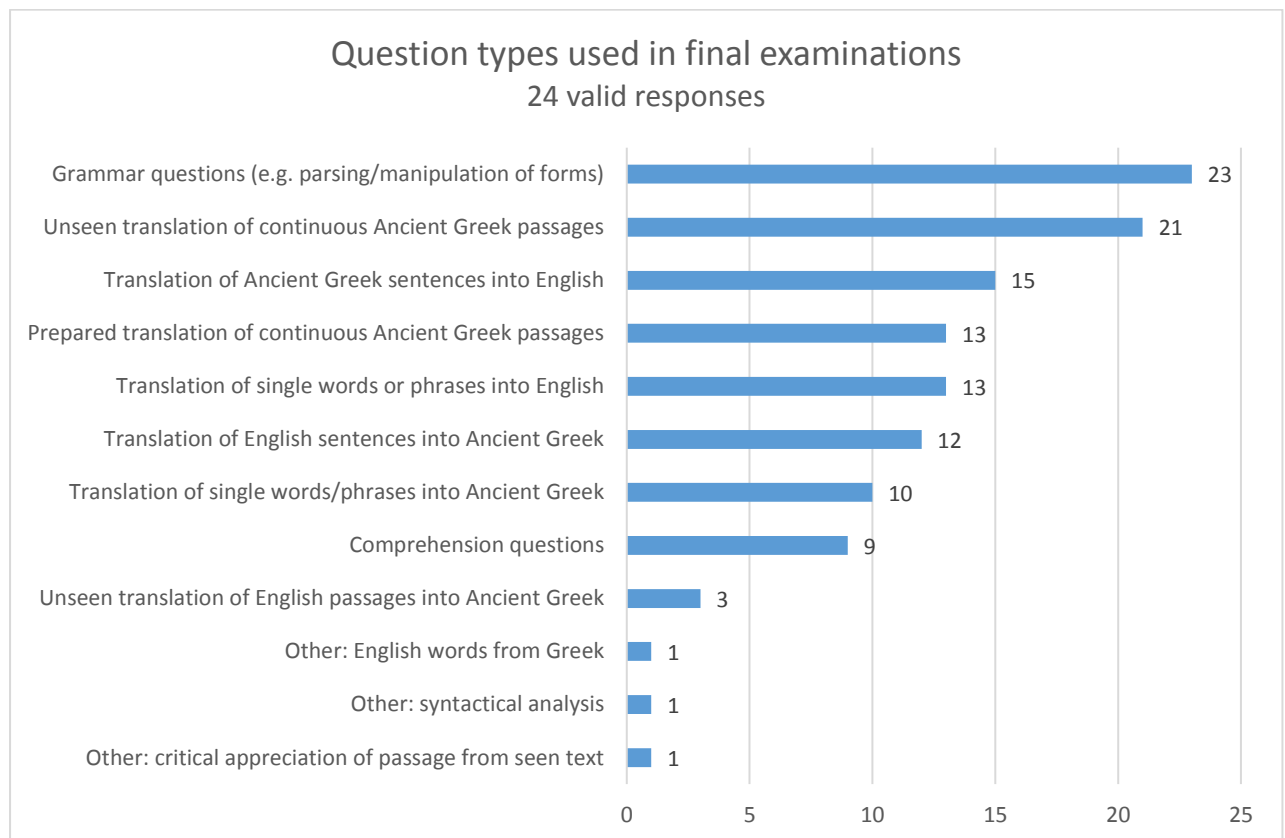
What proportion of the total marks for the module does each assessment component carry?



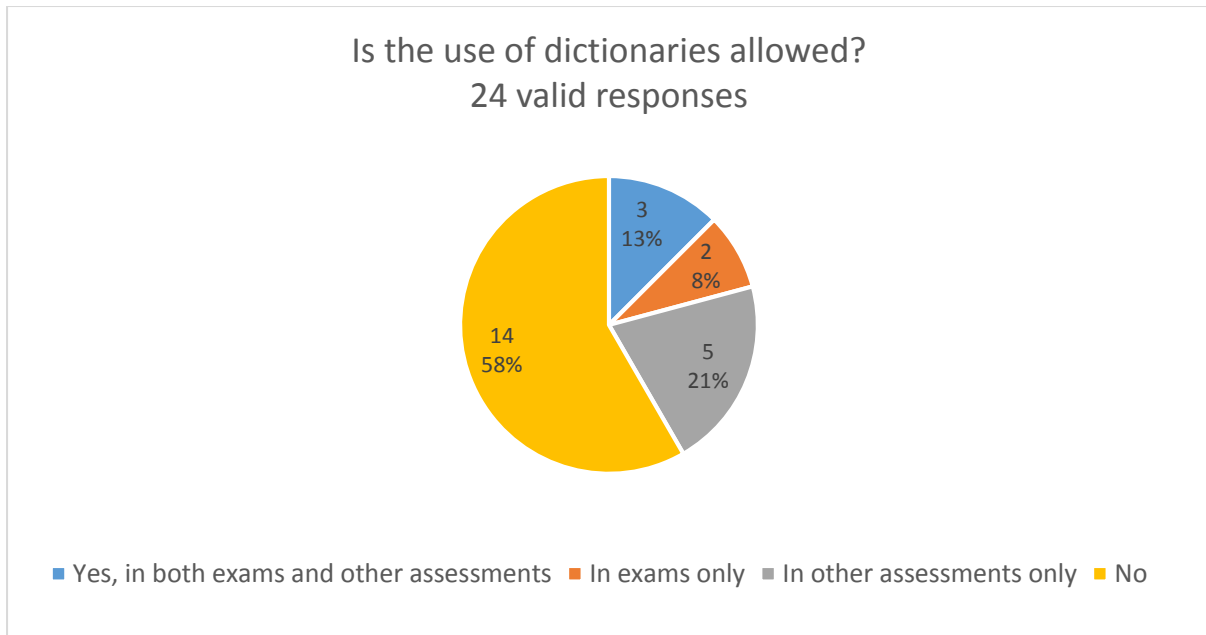
Respondents reported assessed assignments and homework as including:

- homework exercises and quizzes
- practical criticism
- written commentary
- essay
- translation assignment
- comparison of published translations
- ‘Greek in action’ assignments

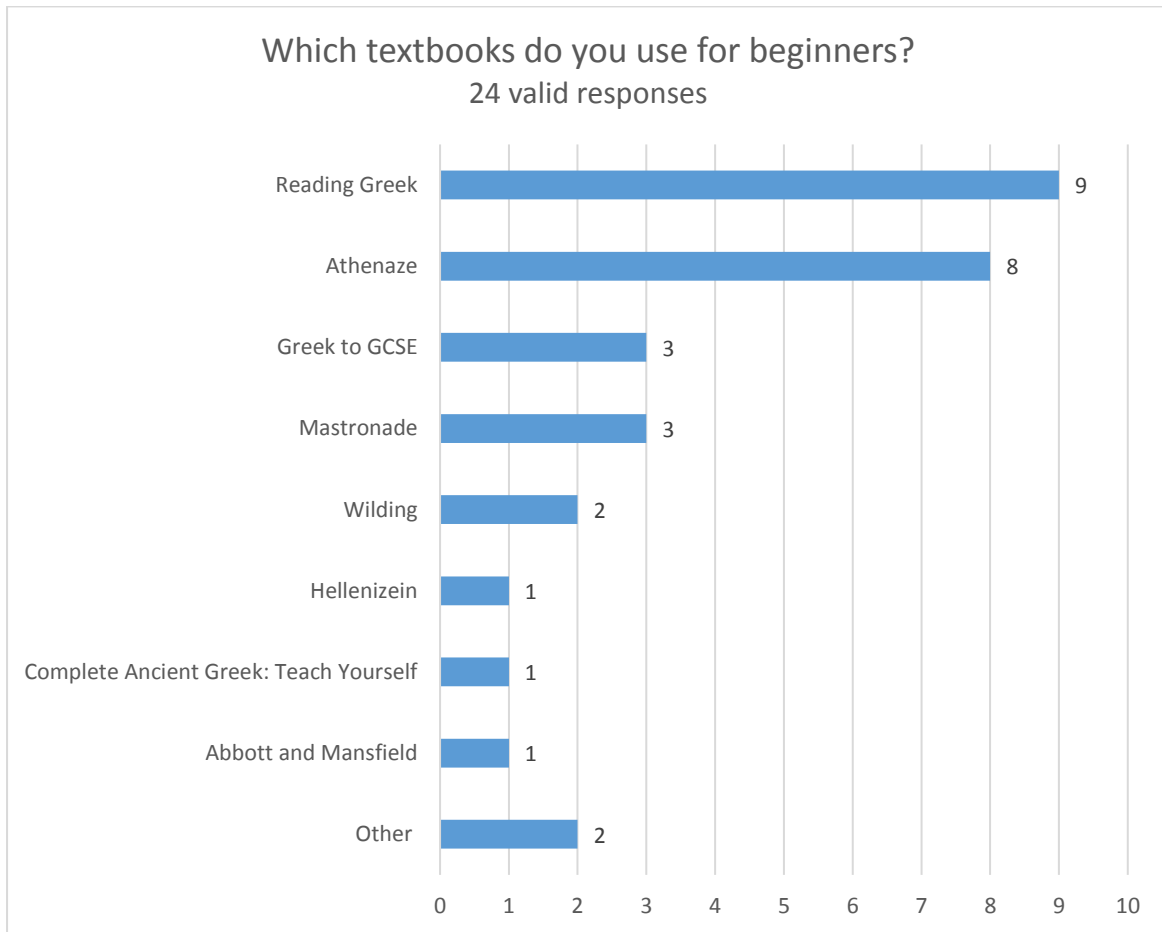
Q: What types of question or exercise do you use in the final exam for the ab initio Ancient Greek modules?



Q: Is the use of dictionaries allowed in exams or other assessments for ab initio module(s)?



11. Course books



Out of 24 respondents, six reported using more than one textbook. Four of these were supplementing a main textbook with other books or materials (such as *Mastronade*, *Abbott and Mansfield* or the ‘Other’ in-house materials used at two institutions). Two respondents were in the process of switching from *Athenaze* to another textbook and commented on both.

When these figures are compared to the 1995 survey, *Reading Greek* can be seen to have lost ground (down from 13 users out of 27 institutions in 1995), whereas *Athenaze* has made significant gains (up from 4.5 users: the publication in 1995 of a UK edition of *Athenaze* employing the conventional British case order may be significant here). *Mastronade* has made a slight gain, up from 2 to 3 users since 1995, whereas *Wilding*, *Teach Yourself* and *Abbott and Mansfield* have all held steady. The new kids on the block are *Greek to GCSE* (first published: 2003) and *Hellenizein* (developed by staff at the University of Leicester: 2004).

Perceived strengths and weaknesses of textbooks

Instructors were asked to list the pros and cons of the textbooks they used.

Reading Greek

Strengths:

- entertaining stories
- stories ‘feel’ like real Greek
- students read continuous prose from the very beginning
- passages contain elements to stretch stronger students
- clear and comprehensive presentation and explanation of morphology and syntax
- grammar presented in a logical order and systematically
- vocabulary generally sensible
- good links to history, culture and literary texts
- coverage of a wide range of prose and verse authors
- ‘works well’ for undergraduates
- helpful reference sections
- extensive range of exercises
- admirable emphasis on English to Greek

Weaknesses:

- occasional messy lay out
- too much reliance on running vocabulary for new passages
- grammatical explanations sometimes cryptic and/or inadequate
- progression of grammar not always logical
- later sections don’t necessarily bring things together so well
- new format much improved, but still a certain amount of propping different books open needed
- too expensive and bulky
- too few exercises
- can be problematic and ‘bitty’ for MA students

Athenaze

Strengths:

- clear lay-out
- students read continuous prose from the very beginning
- good stories that are easy to follow
- well set-out grammatical explanations and tables

- grammar and texts are gathered in the same book (cheap for students)
- texts are closely related to the grammar covered
- useful practice exercises
- lists at the back provide useful help
- equips students well to carry on with reading texts in Intermediate Greek.
- ‘best course’ for the *ab initio* students and ‘generally well liked’ by the language teaching staff

Weaknesses:

- odd order of grammatical topics (a common complaint)
- key topics introduced too late
- grammar not always well explained
- too many more complex forms introduced and glossed in passages
- vocabulary definitions too rudimentary
- not enough drills
- pace: not designed for an intensive Greek course
- teaches the grammar too slowly and then suddenly speeds up
- a bit ‘school book’ in its register and presentation
- a few mistakes (esp. accents and terminology at the back)
- lack of original texts
- odd layout
- needs supplementing
- too much information about accents

Taylor, Greek to GCSE

Strengths:

- clear and well structured
- students know where they are, what they need to know, what they have to do
- course ties in well to the Eton testers and other electronic flash cards
- students with GCSE Greek are familiar with the course

Weaknesses:

- too basic
- progress too slow
- Book 2 contains too much detail and splits topics up
- not rigorous enough for Classics students (cf. Ancient History students)

- students do not encounter real Greek which makes the jump to intermediate challenging

Mastronade

Strengths:

- good grammar explanations, short and manageable
- lots of exercises
- practice texts often based on primary sources
- its philological correctness

Weaknesses:

- heavy learning curve
- grammar explanations are over complex and technical
- designed for an intensive course

Wilding, Greek for Beginners

Strengths:

- book is small and cheap
- useful in its systematic coverage of basic grammar allowing rapid progress
- exercises are straightforward to complete
- material easy to divide up into chunks for learning

Weaknesses:

- quite old fashioned
- not particularly diverse content-wise
- references to learning Latin unhelpful to Latinless students
- students need to attend class to hear explanations of grammar
- book needs to be supported by grammar sheets

Betts, Complete Ancient Greek: Teach Yourself

Weaknesses:

- very dense
- too much detail for beginners
- teacher needs to devise other teaching materials or use other resources to cover each section

Hellenizein

Strengths:

- fits needs of particular cohort very well
- emphasis on primary source material/epigraphy

12. Teaching and learning methods

Study inside class



In free-text comments about the strengths and weaknesses of these activities, a recurring issue was the difficulty of managing classes of mixed ability (and enthusiasm). Most instructors reported using a mixture of group, pair and individual work in addition to whole class teaching. The following comments relate to the perceived advantages and disadvantages of specific activities.

Grammar exposition:

This provides the students with the right tools to face the translation of the text and at the same time equips them with the background they need in order to continue with harder texts.

Teaching of grammar is sometimes considered to be boring by the students - the teacher needs to find some engaging and innovative ways in which he can increase the students' interest and participation.

Grammar exercises:

...crucial for students familiarising themselves with forms and practising how to recognise and correctly identify these. In isolation from sentences for translation, can lead to students being competent in form recognition but less skilled in working out how the elements of a sentence fit together.

Translation from Greek into English:

Continuous passages: very good for developing fluency, but can be extremely time-consuming and problematic in this regard especially with students of widely divergent linguistic ability.

... crucial for seeing how forms work in context and learning to analyse the components of a Greek sentence and skills in translating in a logical order.

... a lot depends on how well the students do the preparation.

Group and pair work:

Working in groups is an effective way of completing material because individual students find it less stressful and because they learn well when they are trying to help/teach each other.

Students seem generally to work well in groups. I attempt to pair weaker with stronger students to encourage them to help each other to learn. Not surprisingly, however, the stronger students tend to prefer to work on their own.

Speaking and reading aloud:

Students find reading/speaking Greek aloud stressful but it is the best way for them to internalise the alphabet/language as a language rather than just as squiggles on a page and it helps them to memorise.

I find that reciting aloud really helps students learn, although they are afraid to do it at the start.

Translation into Greek:

The most useful activity is the one which students perhaps enjoy the least and find the most difficult: translation from English into Greek. This really allows the module teacher to see whether students have understood the constructions they have learned and exactly where their understanding begins to break down.

Working with original texts and/or translations:

Reading original texts [is] fab for giving lots of practice To do this in the context of a challenging and interesting text, read as a window on literature and the ancient world is really good [but] for weaker students it can be too challenging

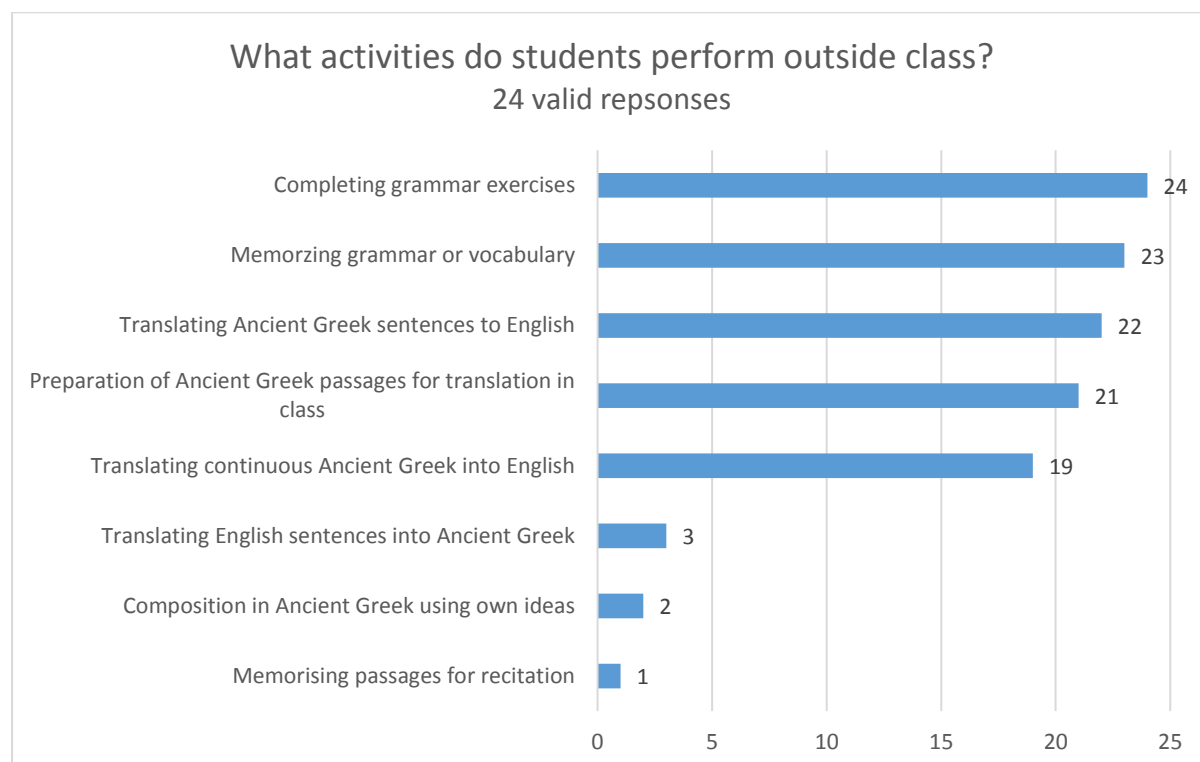
‘Greek in Action’ work with literary and stylistic analysis of original texts alongside published translations: helps students to see from the outset where their study of the language should be leading them, and develops key skills of close reading and finer analysis with regards both to Greek and English.

Providing incentives and maintaining momentum:

Another thing I like is doing an easy little passage a short way into the course which gives a sense of achievement when students are feeling they are very slow to learn and showing them how much they have learnt in a short period of time.

My students like regular mini tests on vocab or grammar as they say this helps them keep up the momentum.

Study outside class



In free-text comments about the strengths and weaknesses of these activities, two themes predominated. The first was the importance of independent study time for memorizing vocabulary and paradigms:

Memorising grammar or vocabulary is undoubtedly the most useful aspect of students' independent study.

Many noted the difficulties that students had with this and some discussed their attempts at finding solutions:

Memorising: essential but boring and can be very hard out of context.

I find students struggle with memorisation so we focus a lot of language learning techniques. A problem can be that they do not allow enough time [for] translating and reading the language which helps so much with memorisation.

The other recurring theme was that of translation from Greek into English and its importance - and also its challenges - as an activity underpinning language acquisition:

Translating Greek into English is the most effective way to consolidate learning and to highlight areas for focus (both for the students and the teacher).

... excellent, but needs to be done in the right way. i.e. sense of what we are reading these texts for, that it is a learning experience, fine to make mistakes, etc., needs to be very strong, otherwise, danger of it becoming an exercise in making it look like you know stuff you don't. Right atmosphere and learning environment essential.

... has the disadvantage that (unless managed carefully) [it] can lead to absence from class if students haven't been able to finish.

A number of responses highlighted problems with students copying translations off the internet or relying too much on Perseus. Another issue was students relying too heavily on their written out translations in class rather than grappling with the Greek on the page. One instructor's solution was as follows:

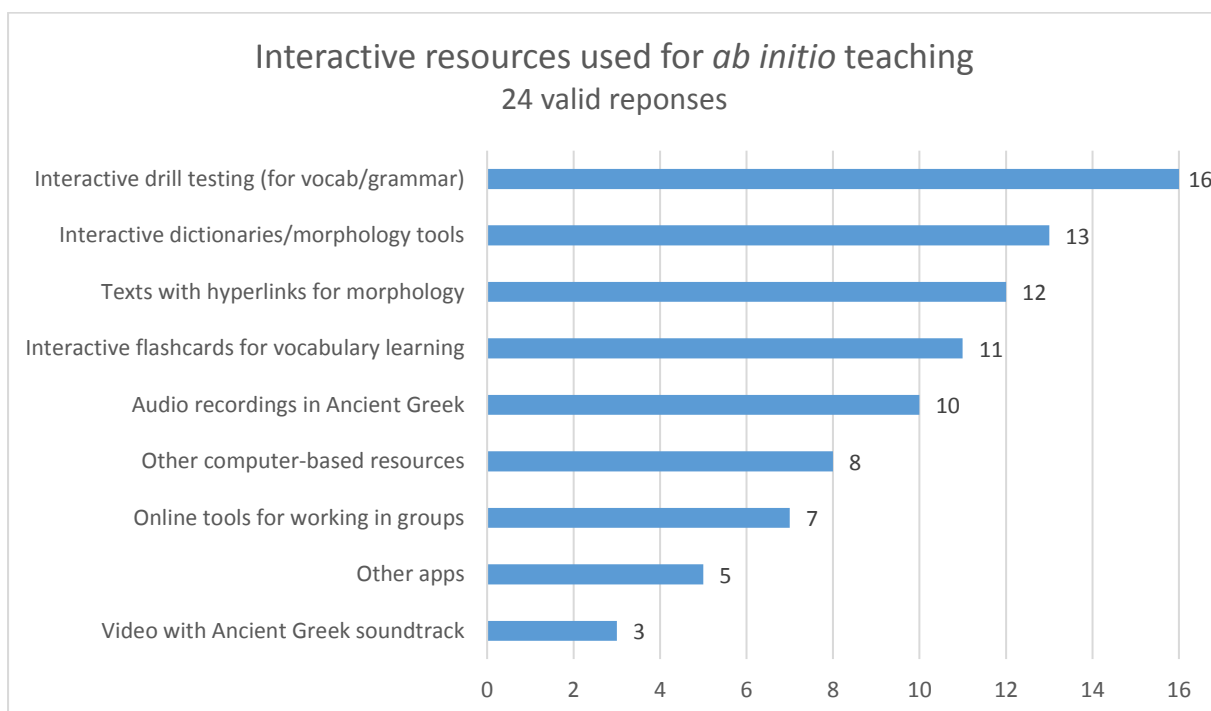
I am ruthless in demanding that passages for translation into English do not have the English translation written down, at least in class: a copy of the Greek can (and should) be annotated - as extensively as necessary.

One thoughtful response noted the importance of non-class time in allowing students to work on tasks in their own time,

... without the pressure of 'performing' in class.

13. Technology

Q: Which of the following materials are used for *ab initio* teaching (please list those you use personally and those you are aware of other colleagues in your university using)?



Q: Please describe the strengths and weaknesses (if any) of what you consider the most useful supplementary materials.

A number of respondents singled out vocabulary testers as the most useful too:

The students find vocabulary apps on their mobiles very helpful.

I think vocab testers are pretty essential and a good way of encouraging and reinforcing learning.

Those few respondents who mentioned grammar testers (e.g. those developed by the Eton Greek Software Project) also made positive noises:

Many thanks to Eton College - particularly helpful for vocabulary and nouns because it is good on repetition, and some students enjoy an against-the-clock challenge.

Perseus tended to be seen as a two-edged sword:

Perseus is useful if used in the right way but some students admit that it can make them lazy about memorising and trying to work syntax out by themselves.

Some respondents saw the use of external sites as a decision for students to make, in line with their personal learning styles:

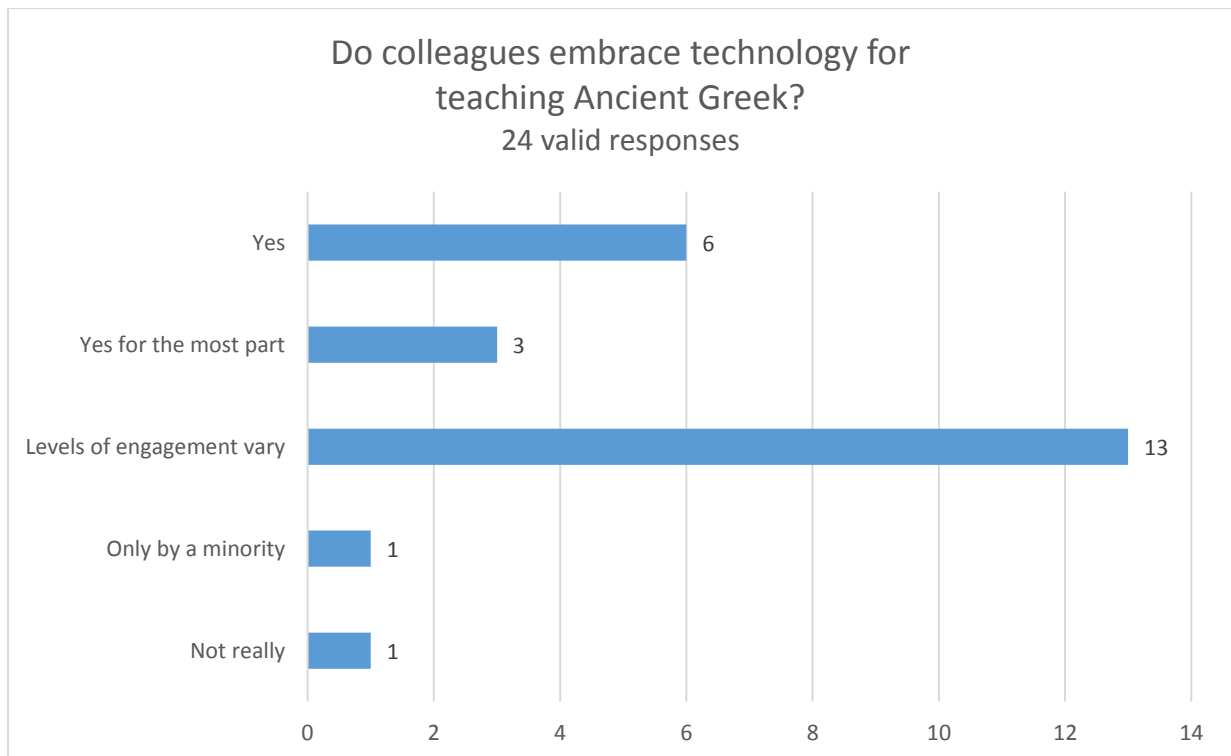
With a wide range of free online activities available, students are encouraged to be more independent and find their own personal approach.

I think it depends crucially on the disposition of the individual student.

And there was the reminder, too, that online materials not tied to the particular course book in use might serve to distract a students' attention from their core learning:

Concentration is on the textbook as it provides enough material.

Q: Would you say that the use of technology for Ancient Greek teaching is actively embraced by colleagues within your Classics department or Classics-related subject area?



14. Innovation

Q: Are there materials or resources that you or your colleagues have developed specifically for ab initio students?

The following materials are listed in order of frequency of mention:

- Supplementary grammar handouts (either for physical or online use)
- Supplementary worksheets and/or exercises
- Interactive (grammar) tests on the VLE
- Drills and vocabulary-testers
- Vocabulary handouts/tailored vocabulary booklet
- Tailored exam reference booklet
- Slides introducing the core grammatical principles
- Passages for translation
- Short-answer tests to be done from memory against the clock
- Games
- Audio recordings of Greek passages
- Short videos on reading/translation techniques
- Supplementary image database of epigraphic material

Three respondents reported having produced their own in-house beginner's Greek courses (one of which was partly based on materials from published textbooks). The Open University was notable in having produced free, open-access interactive materials, such as [Introducing Ancient Greek](#).

James Robson

Head of School of Arts & Cultures
The Open University
james.robson@open.ac.uk

Mair E Lloyd

Senior Project Assistant
Cambridge School Classics Project
mel62@cam.ac.uk